

Choice With(out) Equity? Family Decisions on Return to Urban Schools During COVID-19

Journal of Family Diversity in
Education, 2021
Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 42-63



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Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, most schools across the country closed in-person instruction for a period of time, and many shifted to online schooling. Beginning in fall 2020, schools around the United States began reopening, and many districts offered families a choice to return their children to an in-person or online schooling experience. In many cities, this approach complicated existing school choice and permanent closure policies with already existing equity issues. Building upon previous scholarship on school choice and closure, this exploratory study draws on the concept of school choice with(out) equity. Using data from an online survey ($N = 155$ participants) in August 2020, this study examines why families (50% white, 50% people of color) decided to return their children to in-person schooling in Hartford, Connecticut. This study uses a mixed-methods analysis of qualitative responses and quantitative data to understand family decisions to return to in-person schooling. Family responses focused on the need for childcare for parents and guardians working full-time and in-person as well as health safety that shaped their particular choices about in-person school. Rather than school choices with full equity considerations during the pandemic, family responses suggest *partial* equity in available choices that do not meet all family and child needs. The study raises questions about reapplying old forms of school choice to a new form of temporary school closure during the pandemic.

Keywords: families, choice, equity, COVID-19, urban schools

Introduction

In spring 2020, nearly all of the United States closed in-person PK-12 public school buildings as the entire country faced the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars estimate that mandated in-person school closures likely reduced the incidence and mortality of the COVID-19 pandemic across the United States (Auger et al., 2020). Despite the emergence of remote schooling programs, the prolonged

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closure of school buildings placed tremendous economic, health, and educational pressures on families, as their children were not able to experience in-person schooling (Jones, 2020; Scott, 2020). During the following summer months, many state and district leaders across the U.S. debated the reopening of public school buildings to offer in-person schooling in the fall of 2020. From California to Connecticut, states across the country offered different responses to the question of in-person reopening (Gecker & Ronayne, 2020; Rabe Thomas, 2020). Depending on state and district policy, many families needed to make challenging decisions regarding whether and when to return their children to some form of school amidst a terrain of health and economic crisis with deep racial inequalities.

Amid these complex conditions, families were offered choices about sending their children to in-person school during the COVID-19 pandemic. By the summer of 2020, school districts began to propose choices that included in-person, hybrid (partly in-person), and remote schooling options. Even districts that offered in-person schooling, including Hartford (CT), Little Rock (AK), Miami-Dade (FL), and New York City, also offered families the option for students to continue with remote learning (Maxwell, 2020). Many families with children were required to make a choice among a mixed set of school options. Understanding new forms of school choice matters as educators work toward the next phases of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Building upon previous scholarship on school choice and closure, this study draws on the concept of school choice with(out) equity (Witten et al., 2003; Lipman et al., 2014; de la Torre et al., 2015; Duncan-Shippy, 2019). A progressive approach to equity in education is situated around the notion of opportunities and support for children to meet similar academic goals (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Scott, 2013; Ishimaru, 2020, p. 10). When considering school choice programs, equity policies must both recognize and address systemic racial inequality within schools and the contexts in which they exist (Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013, p. 126). Equity in school choice includes sufficient resources, access, and support services provided by states and districts (Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013, p. 127; Horsford et al., 2019, p. 132). As these and other scholars note, this form of equity attempts to systematically address inequality in early childhood education, funding, academic staff, racial isolation (e.g., desegregation), and other areas (Scott, 2013, p. 62). In light of these points, “choice without equity” fails to properly respond to these needs inside and outside school, including depleted or unstable housing, family work status, and lack of medical care (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013).

Regarding the choice of attending in-person school during the COVID-19 pandemic, the question remains of whether families made choices with equity in either in-person or remote/online learning. A choice with equity for in-person school could have meant sufficient face coverings, small class sizes for social distance, and other physical safety measures (Gurdasani et al., 2021). Relatedly, an equitable remote choice would have meant that children had access to technology, added instructional support in the curriculum, and work/childcare support (external) for families that chose this option. During this moment of returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, the question of the equity of these school choices was at the forefront (Roesch, 2020).

Focusing on the medium-sized northeastern city of Hartford, Connecticut, this mixed-methods study examines the decision made by families to choose in-person school or other options for their children in the summer before the 2020–21 school year. This convergent mixed-methods inquiry first uses quantitative data from an online survey to understand the relationships between choosing in-person schooling and family demographics, access needs at children’s schools, and school ratings during the pandemic. Next, the study uses qualitative methods to examine open-ended responses about the choice of in-person schooling. This study aims to answer the following research question: Why did families decide for their children to return or not return to in-person education at schools in Hartford, Connecticut, during the COVID-19 pandemic in late summer 2020?

In places such as Hartford, families were asked by the state and school districts to respond to temporary, health-related school building closures due to the pandemic. This version of school choice and temporary school building closure in this and other cities resembled similar past policies of permanent school closure that also interrupted and complicated families' lives. As Chang-Bacon (2021) notes, "Interrupted schooling is not a new phenomenon." The current moment must be compared to the past, and these past experiences must be considered as we move forward. In sum, the interruption of schooling now has similarities to past moments of interrupted formal schooling experienced by children facing multiple challenges in their lives.

This exploratory study argues that rather than school choices that offered full equity considerations during the pandemic, Hartford families faced a landscape of choices that offered *partial* equity. Many families made choices based on one particular feature in each choice of schooling. For example, families chose in-person schooling for learning and childcare needs to continue full-time, in-person work, and these equity resources were not available if they selected remote school. And families that chose remote schooling for safety knew that the resources and practices to prevent COVID-19 infection were not available, in their view, through in-person schooling. For many families, a full set of equity considerations—deeper learning, childcare, safety from COVID-19—were not all available in either schooling choice. Families understood and made choices based on the most important characteristic of partial equity available to them. Many families also noted that their choices felt required or even forced. These survey responses raise questions about the use of a new form of school choice policy in the process of reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

School Choice and Closure across the U.S.

Prior to COVID-19, school choice and permanent closures were already affecting many Black and Latino parents with school-aged children in cities around the country. Beyond the primary mechanism of housing as the way to purchase attendance to schools, the secondary form of school selection, or choice, has been in place for at least the last half-century (Murnane, 2005; Dougherty, 2012). These school choice programs, including charter and magnet schools, have been advertised as a way to connect parent preferences with improved academic performance and market forms of accountability (Cobb et al., 2011; Horsford et al., 2019). In this market concept, if parents are allowed to choose schools, then schools would, in theory, perform well or lose students (Chubb & Moe, 1988). In newer versions of this concept, providing parents with more forms of school choice has been referred to as a "portfolio" model where multiple types of schools are offered by urban districts and/or private providers (Scott, 2011; Cucchiara, 2013; Quinn & Ogburn, 2019). These market concepts (e.g., portfolio model) have grown in cities in recent decades and are in cities facing COVID-19.

Scholars have raised substantial questions about issues related to various forms of school choice. In particular, scholars of school choice now raise questions about financial sustainability, democratic practices, community, equity, and diversity (Horsford et al., 2019). Along these lines, Holme (2002) found that the primarily White parents in her qualitative study relied on information about schools from other parents rather than official statistics such as overall school achievement. This indicates school choice can work in a way that relies on different information within racial groups. For example, in one mixed-methods study, Latino parents noted safety and discipline as key issues in their school choice rather than only dominant measures of achievement or quality that White families discussed (Mavrogordato & Stein, 2016). And these choices are not in a vacuum. As Lubienski (2007) notes, educators and administrators in market forms of school choice often seek to attract "better-

performing” students rather than children most in need. Thus, it is important to examine various forms of school choice as a process between families and schools within particular social contexts.

Closure and Choice

Added to the complexity of school choice is the deep connection to policies of school closure. As a market-oriented reform, school choice proponents envisioned parents choosing new schools that would eventually lead to school closings due to lower enrollment related to decreases in funding and/or negative consequences through accountability policies (Witten et al., 2003; Lipman, 2011; Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013, p. 124). Many scholars note the possibility of using choice as a way to create multiracial spaces (e.g., diversity, desegregation), yet the policy implementation of school choice is connected to the privatization of schools, shifts toward market-based schooling, competition between accountability and racial diversity, and opportunity hoarding that benefits White families over families of color (Cucchiara, 2013; Frankenberg et al., 2017; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2018; Thompson-Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019).

School closures are often connected to this implementation of school choice. And the cumulative result over the last two decades of school closures was the displacement of a disproportionate number of Black and increasingly Latino students and communities, particularly in cities (Duncan-Shippy, 2019; Diem & Welton, 2020). For many families, school closures were negative experiences along psychological (e.g., “root shock”), sociological (e.g., “institutional mourning”), material (e.g., “dispossession,” “displacement”), and systemic (e.g., “structural violence”) ways of thinking (Fullilove, 2001; Aggarwal et al., 2012; Lipman, 2014; Hernandez & Galletta, 2016; Ewing, 2018; Galletta, 2019). In sum, Black and Latino families have experienced various forms of interconnected school choice and closure.

In cities across the country, these related policies also created a particular form of school choice after school closure. When schools close permanently for accountability, facility, or financial reasons, families and children in many urban school districts are often required to choose new schools. For example, families in Chicago with children in permanently closed schools nearly a decade ago were offered some degree of involuntary choice of a new school. In one study, Black Chicago parents explained their school choice after a permanent closure based on proximity to home, perceptions of safety, strong academics, and personal connections to people and staff from closed schools (de la Torre et al., 2015). Many parents responded that they “did not have choice” of a new school after permanent closure. In this way, school closures in market contexts can create an illusion of choice that families face.

School Choice After Pandemic Closures

The current moment of school choice to respond to the new context of temporary school building closures during COVID-19 can be viewed as a new, modified application of past forms of school choice (e.g., choice after closure). Of particulate note is that many urban districts facing decisions about returning to school in Fall 2020 had previously offered some variety of school choice related to permanent school closure policies in past years. Like Chicago, cities such as Hartford and San Antonio, to name only two, closed schools due to accountability and market policies over the last decade and offered parents a “choice” of new schools to attend, including the same building with different management or learning themes (de la Torre et al., 2015; Cotto, 2018; Phillips, 2020). Reapplying the school choice concept after closure to the COVID-19 context, states and districts began to offer some version of choice of either in-person or remote/online forms of schooling after the spring 2020 physical building closures. Districts using this approach included, but were not limited to, Hartford (CT), Miami-Dade (FL), New York City, Fairfax (VA), and San Antonio (Maxwell, 2020; SBG San Antonio, 2020). Later, in 2021, districts such as Chicago also offered choices for parents of

either in-person or remote schooling after the previous temporary school building closures (Leone, 2021).

The new form of choice of either remote or in-person learning related to concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic does not entirely match old forms of school choice. A key difference is that past forms of school choice were often related to permanent physical movement from one building to another. There are key similarities in terms of communities in cities that have previously faced a forced choice of new buildings (or even the same buildings with new management) after school closures. In addition, there was an inversion of interests supporting choice of schooling after these temporary school closures during the pandemic. For example, two former U.S. secretaries of education who were supportive of permanent school closures as local and federal policies in past decades recently cowrote guidance on reopening temporarily closed schools to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lipman, 2011; Debenedetti, 2020; Frieden et al., 2020). On the other side, teachers and activists in cities such as Chicago who opposed permanent school closures nearly a decade ago supported the temporary closure of schools during the pandemic for the safety of workers, students, and families (Resnikoff, 2013; Issa, 2020). This inversion of responses helps situate different forms of school choice after closure: from permanent spatial dislocation to temporary schooling modes.

After schools closed in-person activities in spring 2020, many families and children struggled with various forms of remote or online school. This remote schooling was a temporary and immediate response to a deadly pandemic. Despite this being an emergency situation, recent scholarship raises a number of questions about remote or online learning in spring 2020. For example, DeMatthews et al. (2020) noted, “As districts rely on online distance learning, equitable access to learning opportunities is a chief concern” (p. 400). Along these lines, Domina et al. (2021) reported that students in remote schooling showed higher engagement when connected to high-speed internet and internet devices, more diverse socioemotional and academic learning opportunities at home, and social relationships with other highly engaged families. Therefore, student experiences during remote schooling were associated with family material and social resources. In addition to questions about student engagement, families also faced new obligations. As recent scholarship suggests, the move to remote schooling “forced parents into new teaching roles as *proxy* educators” (Davis et al., 2021, p. 1). Families then faced elevated mental distress that required support in a way that resembled past teacher burnout.

There was also evidence that reopening schools in person had mixed support from families and students, particularly along lines of race and class. In an interrogation of various reopening policy options, a number of surveys by commercial groups compiled information about family needs when considering a return to school (Caissa Public Strategy, 2020). In one survey, only 55% of families wanted to return to in-person school (Kiernan, 2020). In other studies, researchers directly examined Black and Latino family concerns (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). For example, one survey of 800 respondents found that Black, Latino, and low-income families, particularly in New York City, disproportionately felt “wary of reopening schools” because of concerns about “their family’s safety and well-being” (Global Strategy Group & Education Trust – New York, 2020, p.1). In addition, Domina et al. (2021) found different perceptions of remote schooling along racial lines.

In fact, families in many urban school districts overwhelmingly chose not to return to in-person schooling. From fall 2020 to spring 2021, local city newspapers reported district numbers and rates of families choosing remote or online schooling instead of in-person forms. For example, Hartford Public Schools reported to the local news that “54% of Hartford families have opted to start the year with remote learning, and more than 20% have not made a decision yet (Blanco, 2020).” Concomitantly, many suburban and rural districts announced opening plans with more prominent in-person or hybrid in-person/remote plans. Beyond urban and suburban lines, the numbers were even more stark across racial lines within districts. Offering a choice of in-person schooling later in the

school year, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that fewer than 20% of families chose in-person school. Moreover, “When CPS offered the choice to return to schools to families in the first two waves, 67% of white students opted in, followed by 55% of multiracial students, 34% of Black students, 33% of Asian students and 31% of Latino students” (Leone, 2021). This pattern emerged in cities across the U.S.

Responding to Pandemic School Closure With Choice in Connecticut

By mid-summer 2020, state and district leaders in states such as Connecticut began to consider reopening schools on an in-person basis. Organizational bureaucrats and some elected officials reframed schools as organizations that are crucial to economic development along with academic and social goals. For example, the Connecticut governor stated, “I wanted to make sure we had a class day and a class week that was something that employers can bank upon for their employees, so they knew what the schedule would be” (Rabe Thomas, 2020). In sum, in-person schooling would have been associated with childcare for families to work and a financial gain for employers.

Following this choice logic, the State of Connecticut offered a number of resources for implementing family choices of either in-person or remote learning. In guidance entitled *Advance, Adapt, Achieve: Connecticut’s Plan to Learn and Grow Together*, key goals are safety and access, in-person schooling, equity, access, support, and two-way communication with families. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CT SDE) also suggested that districts offer in-person school or an option of “temporarily choosing not to participate” (p. 6). CT SDE guidance to districts for in-person schooling suggested following and monitoring CDC rules that may change, educating children on how COVID-19 is spread, practicing social distance rules and protocols, using clear procedures for being in schools such as washing hands, and requiring facial guards and masks to prevent viral spread (CT SDE, 2020).

In addition to guidance on safety rules and practices provided by the CT SDE, the legislature and governor provided a range of resources to public schools. The State and private donors facilitated the delivery of 141,000 student laptops/devices for remote learning (Office of Governor Lamont, 2020). Further, the State of Connecticut and the federal government offered additional funds for public and private school districts to operate as they decided—in-person, remote, or hybrid—during the 2020–21 school year (Reck, 2021). The CT SDE focused its approach to equity on written guidance, laptop computers, and additional funding to school districts while allowing, at least on paper, various schooling options. Equity among choices of in-person or remote schooling allowed various approaches while implicitly acknowledging a difference in resources as the “community and school building’s unique circumstances” (CT SDE, 2020, p. 4).

Conceptual Framework: School Choice With(out) Equity

This study applies the concept of choice with(out) equity to examine family decisions to return their children to public schools in person during a global pandemic. As Scott and Stuart Wells (2013) note, school choice policies can advance “the democratic goal of greater educational equity” if they are “conceptualized and constructed in a manner that acknowledges the structural inequality within which public schools exist today and if they include sensible and powerful provisions to counteract its effects” (p. 126). In other words, educational policies such as school choice must also address and counteract other structural inequalities enmeshed in schools and their social context. Otherwise, policies such as school choice of different buildings can exacerbate existing inequalities inside and outside of schools. In particular, equity concerns can relate to insufficient funding, human and physical resources, and support for learning in classrooms and schools (e.g., language access, special education resources, and staffing; Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013). In addition, out-of-school conditions that can

undermine equitable education may include inadequate information and transportation, depleted or unstable housing, family work status, and lack of medical care. Just offering the choice of a school (e.g., voucher, charter, magnet) without addressing with equity the issues that children and families may face within and outside of school amounts to “choice without equity” (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013). New forms of school choice during the pandemic may have complicated family experiences in places with existing school choice and equity concerns.

This revised version of the choice of in-person or remote schooling raised the questions of whether there was family choice with or without equity built into policy implementation. As previously stated, an equitable choice for in-person school might mean sufficient face coverings, small class sizes for social distance, and other physical safety measures such as effective ventilation, mass COVID-19 testing, vaccinations for adults (not available until early 2021), and other support for children’s learning and well-being (Gurdasani et al., 2021). Relatedly, an equitable remote choice might mean that children have access to technology, added instructional support in the curriculum, and work/childcare support (external) for parents that choose this option. The choice between in-person and online schooling was not equity in and of itself (Foley, 2020). In the choice of in-person or online school, choice with equity would mean sufficient provisions to access either option in this particular moment. Asking families about their choice not only shows their priorities behind decisions but also what efforts, policies, and resources toward equity that districts offered.

Methods

This exploratory study focuses on family decisions about whether to return their children to in-person or remote schooling in Hartford, Connecticut. In Hartford, families must choose the schools which they want their children to attend. In addition to the choice of enrollment in “traditional” schools for Hartford Public Schools, choice also happens through a variety of regional interdistrict magnet schools, charter schools, and cross-district choice programs that are largely the result of the *Sheff v. O’Neill* (1996) desegregation case and response that featured school choice programs as a remedy (Green, 1999; Cobb, 2011). If families do not choose a school in the official regional lottery process, then they are placed by the Hartford district in whatever space is still available in a non-lottery school. In addition, many lottery-based Hartford-area schools (i.e., interdistrict magnet schools) now actively work to attract a racially diverse group of students (Debs, 2019). In past years, reduced isolation meant any Asian or White students that were not Black/African American or “any part Hispanic” (Sheff v. O’Neill, 2013, p. 5). Thus, many families in Hartford are familiar to some degree with school choice.

Like in other cities, many Hartford families have also experienced permanent school closures in the past. In 2007, Hartford Public Schools became an all-choice district that featured school closures for accountability and the creation of new school forms and themes. As Pappano (2010) notes in her study of school turnaround policies, “The theme of closure, redesign, and restart is a familiar cycle in Hartford” (p. 27). However, permanent school closures have been contested over the last decade, and the academic results of turnaround reforms are mixed at best, as achievement results coincided with the exclusion of students with disabilities (Cotto, 2016). In Hartford, permanent school closure and choice are interconnected policies.

Data Collection: Online Survey With Quantitative and Qualitative Responses

This study is based on online survey responses from families with children in schools in Hartford about their decision to return to in-person school. We conducted an online survey to reveal the basis for family decisions to return to in-person school or the alternative of remote schooling. The survey provided families with the option to read question text and respond in English or Spanish. Specifically,

the survey asked participants to answer the question “Will you be sending your child back to school for in-person learning, if available, for the first day of the fall 2020–21 semester?” This question resembled local districts’ survey questions about return (Hartford Public Schools, 2020). Like those surveys, families could respond either “yes” or “no.” Thus, this qualitative response of either “yes” or “no” could also be interpreted as a binary numerical response (no = 0, yes = 1). By focusing on decision to return to in-person school, the survey invited a purposeful sample of families to analyze one part of reopening implementation.

In addition, the survey offered participants a series of quantitative and qualitative questions to describe themselves and their children. The survey also asked key questions about family experiences at school before and during the pandemic in already complex choice environments (e.g., charter, cross-district, magnets, traditional). To situate family choices, the survey first asked families, “How would you describe your experience with your child’s online learning when schools closed from March to June 2020? Please explain.” In addition to questions created by the authors and revised from other surveys, this survey included three sets of questions about family demographics, children’s needs in schools, and family ratings of their school experiences (Ewall-Wice, 2020; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Because of safety restrictions on in-person activities, the authors distributed the survey only online from August 10 to 19, 2020. The authors also shared the survey link on social media group pages and local news sites (León, 2020). Families participated voluntarily with no compensation.

Data Analysis

To analyze the survey data, we used a convergent mixed-methods approach that began with quantitative data as a way to situate the prioritized qualitative data (quantitative → qualitative). Matching this approach, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time in the survey. Next, the two types of data were analyzed separately and compared to determine if “findings confirm[ed] or disconfirm[ed] each other” (Creswell, 2014, p. 219). This approach was fruitful since the survey collected both quantitative and qualitative information with the same group of people rather than connecting two separate sets of data with potentially overlapping or different samples (Kirshner et al., 2010; Patel et al., 2016).

The analysis first calculated descriptive statistics on family demographics (e.g., race, work status, town of residence). In the RStudio program, we then identified correlations between family variables and the dependent variable of the decision to return to school in person (binary: no = 0, yes = 1). Drawing on past studies of decisions to return to schools after permanent closure, key variables included family demographics of race and full-time work status, children’s needs in schools such as bussing, service needs, multiple children in school, and lottery-based placement (de la Torre et al., 2015, pp. 44-47). Several of these key demographic variables were converted to binary measures (e.g., full-time work = 1, not full-time work = 0; child takes bus = 1, no bus = 0). In addition, variables also included family ratings of a) their school experience in the year of 2019–20, b) their experience with the shift to remote learning when COVID-19 closed in-person schooling in spring 2020, and c) their concern for health safety in the possible return to in-person schooling in fall 2020. The family ratings on these variables were reported on scales of 0.00–10.00.

Next, we used deductive coding to analyze the open-ended, qualitative responses about returning to school in person. In particular, this analysis examines family responses to the two written questions: 1) What was their experience with temporary in-person school closure with the transition to remote school in spring 2020? and 2) Why did parents decide to return to in-person school or not? Using NVivo software, the responses to these two questions were coded or “chunked” into similar categories (Bhattacharya, 2017). These codes were clustered into categories within or outside of the “choice with(out) equity” framework (Bhattacharya, 2017, pp. 150-151; Horsford et al., 2019). Using the quantitative data analysis as an initial step, the qualitative analysis was then compared and contrasted

to the descriptive statistical analysis in order to develop a “more complete picture” and establish “convergence” or “divergence” between the types of data (Grbich, 2013, p. 29; Creswell, 2014). As a final step, any areas of divergence were addressed by returning to the data to propose possible explanations and needs for further inquiry in either the quantitative or qualitative data (Creswell, 2014, p. 223).

Findings

Quantitative Analysis

A majority of survey participants identified as female. Out of 320 clicks on the survey, 152 completed 100% of the survey, and three participants completed more than 80%. Therefore, the final sample includes 155 responses. Among this group, 137, or 88%, of participants identified as female. Only 13 participants, or 8%, identified as male, and four participants also identified “in another way” or with non-binary gender identity. As André-Bechaly (2005) notes about choice of school programs in the past, “The work involved in choosing schools only adds to the women’s work that mothers already do on behalf of their children’s education” (p.10). Like past scholarship on choice of particular schools and programs, this study mostly includes female family members, who reported on their decisions about forms of schooling in the process of reopening of buildings for fall 2020.

In terms of racial identification, this sample of participant families resembled the region rather than only the city of Hartford’s composition of students. First, nearly two-thirds of participants responded as Hartford (city proper) residents. Among these survey participants, 70 (45%) parents identified as White, 56 (36%) as Hispanic/Latino, 17 (11%) as Black, and 12 (8%) as Two or More Races. Several Asian families completed the survey, but their children were among the dozen participants that attended school outside of Hartford in other towns not in the inquiry. Therefore, roughly half the participants identified as either Latino, Black, Two or More Races, and another half identified as White. In comparison, Hartford Public Schools alone had 54.4% Latino, 29.4% Black or African American, 9.2% White, and 4.4% Asian students in 2019–20 (CT SDE, 2021). And *all* of the Hartford region’s public school districts and public-private charter school districts had student racial demographics of 47.6% White, 26.4% Latino, 14.3% Black, and 7.4% Asian students. Thus, the sample of participants in this survey resembles the Hartford *region’s* student demographics, but not the *city* school district alone.¹

The majority of families responding to this survey chose “no” in response to the question of whether they would return to in-person school. There were 89 out of 155 families that responded “no” to returning to in-person schooling, or 57%. And there were 66 families that selected “yes” to returning to in-person schooling, or 43%. Nearly 70% (69.7%) of all participants identified as having full-time work. Importantly, the survey rate of choice to return in person resembled the early reported rate of families that selected in-person schooling in Hartford (Blanco, 2020). According to Hartford Public Schools, by August 3, 2020, the district “received over 12,000 responses from across the district with 42% choosing to return in-person and 58% choosing to continue with online learning” (Hartford Public Schools, 2020). The overlapping regional district that operates magnet schools, Capitol Region Education Council, had 42% of students select remote/online schooling (Capitol Region Education Council, 2020). However, school decisions varied across demographics, student needs, and family experiences.

Using the RStudio program, descriptive statistical correlations were conducted. Several correlations between the choice of in-person school (or not) and independent variables offer

¹ *Appendix A* offers descriptive statistics of the survey participants.

important insight. As shown in Table 1, many independent variables were not closely related ($r < .1$) to the selection of in-person schooling. However, several variables had minor to moderate relations ($r < .3$) and were statistically significant correlations. Independent variables of full-time work status, choice school enrollment, and last year’s school rating were positively and significantly correlated with in-person school selection (i.e., “yes”). On the other hand, independent variables of person-of-color identification, multiple district enrollment, and concern for health in returning in person were negatively and significantly correlated with in-person school selection. These statistically significant correlations do not explain the cause of why families selected in-person school. But they suggest various connections between family status (e.g., full-time work, racial identification), concerns about returning to in-person schooling, and the context of Hartford’s existing school choice environment (e.g., bus transportation, multiple school districts, lottery-based school).

Of particular note were the differences of choice to return between all racial groups. As a whole group, all participants identifying as people of color—Black, Latino, and Two or More Races—more often selected “no” to returning to in-person school. While slightly more families identifying as White selected “yes” to in-person schooling (yes = 36, no = 34), people of color mostly selected “no” to in-person schooling (yes = 30, no = 55). However, when viewed as distinct racial groups, Black families stood out as having selected “no” to in-person schooling, or 14 out of 17 (yes = 3, no = 14). Correlations by each group show this distinction. At a particular level ($p < .05$), Black families were negatively and significantly correlated to in-person school selection ($r = -0.174, p < .05$) and White families were positively and significantly correlated to in-person school selection ($r = 0.162, p < .05$). On the other hand, Latino ($r = -0.022$) and Two or More Race families ($r = -0.054$) numerically selected “no” to in-person schooling but were not statistically significantly correlated to selecting this option. In sum, Black and White families were numerically on opposite ends of this choice spectrum, while Latino and Two or More Race families were numerically in between these groups.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Major Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. In-Person school choice	-									
2. Race - Person of Color	-0.16*	-								
3. Full-time work	0.22**	0	-							
4. Bus transportation	0.01	0.08	0.3**	-						
5. Education service need	0.09	0.09	-0.04	0.12	-					
6. Multiple district enrollment	-0.13†	0.11	0.1	0.29**	0.02	-				
7. Choice school (lottery-based)	0.17*	-0.2*	0.23**	-0.06	-0.12	-0.17*	-			
8. Last school year rating	0.23**	-0.15†	0.13	-0.08	-0.15†	-0.14†	0.13†	-		
9. Transition to online rating	-0.07	-0.03	0.1	0.04	-0.03	-0.05	-0.09	0.6**	-	
10. Concern health return in-person rating	-0.38**	0.23**	-0.07	0.05	0.02	-0.02	0	-0.14†	-0.02	-
<i>M (Mean)</i>	0.43	0.55	0.70	0.36	0.45	0.11	0.83	7.46	5.71	8.55
<i>SD (Standard Deviation)</i>	0.50	0.50	0.46	0.48	0.50	0.31	0.37	2.31	2.63	2.26

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Qualitative Analysis

Challenges and Successes With Remote Learning in Spring 2020

Families described their experience with the temporary closure of in-person schools as challenging in spring 2020. Many parents directly responded with the words “challenge” or “challenging” during this period. In practice, families across the several Hartford districts in this study went to some form of remote or online learning as schools across the state and country temporarily closed. For example, one Latino parent wrote, “It was challenging at first as expected but it worked given the circumstances.” Another family noted, “Somewhat chaotic in the beginning, and challenging,

as it was for most parents.” Challenges varied with key themes, including support for children’s learning in remote schooling and balancing family needs.

Support to Learn

Among these challenges in spring 2020, families expressed new responsibilities to quickly move to support remote learning during these sudden in-person school building closures. For example, one White family critiqued remote learning by sharing that “[they] have a really academically motivated child, and he really just wasn’t engaged in learning completely from apps/programs. [Online program name removed] was a daily struggle, not because he couldn’t do it, but he was so disinterested.” Families also gave brief descriptions about temporary in-person school closure and remote learning, such as “super hard” and “difficult. Unstructured.” Similarly, one Black parent wrote about remote learning during in-person closure, “It was disorganized and not much was expected from my children, academically.” And one Latino parent wrote, “A little frustrated was [sic] difficult to deal with my son.” These challenges with emergency remote learning were associated with both learning and families’ day-to-day lives.

Many families also noted that their children did make learning progress during remote schooling in spring 2020. These positive experiences were noted across racial groups. For example, one Black family noted that remote schooling was “safe and effective.” In addition, another Black family noted, “Online learning worked well for us. She got better grades than normal. I believe it’s because there were fewer distractions at home.” A few Latino families noted the temporary in-person closures and remote schooling as “good,” “very good,” and “was ok.” Another family noted, “He learned. Not as much as if he was in school but he did learn and we were all safe.” Many families tolerated the emergency nature of this remote schooling.

Many other families and children struggled with remote schooling during temporary in-person school closures. Within these struggles was the issue of remote learning itself, particularly in the areas of engagement, communication with teachers/schools, structure of lessons, and learning. One Black family noted about their child’s experience, “Very hard for her. She needed hands on.” Related to this critique of remote schooling, one White family noted, “The [Product Name Removed] classroom setup was poorly designed. The curriculum products (online learning) offered by [District Name Removed] did not allow for differentiated learning and were not appropriate for my child. There was very little interactivity.” In terms of learning, one Black family also wrote, “My oldest child barely made contact with teachers at all. She was overwhelmed with the work and didn’t receive much help. Some days, she didn’t even log on.” One Latino parent described the closure and remote school experience as “fatal. Nadie sabía nada de nada.”² Families had a wide variety of experiences with remote schooling.

Special Needs

Many families struggled with remote school because their children with special needs shared particularly difficult situations in this form of schooling. These needs included support for emerging bilingual children (e.g., “English Learners”) and children with disabilities with a formal Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 designation. For example, one Latino family noted, “Muy distraído, no hacía sus tareas. No le ofrecieron ninguna alternativa basada en su 504. Le fue mal.”³ This quote illustrates how this family’s child had a negative experience that was very distracting from their schoolwork, and that an alternative to the remote schooling program which reflected their 504 plan was not provided. Even when these families had support to some degree, many had very difficult situations with the district in

² Author translation: Awful. Nobody knew anything about anything.

³ Author translation: “Very distracted, they didn’t do their homework. They didn’t offer any alternative based on the 504. They did poorly. ”

meeting their children's learning needs through remote learning. Another Latino family wrote this about their child on one of the more substantive responses:

His teacher never contacted him via video chats & never provided any lesson plans. She would just post assignments to be completed. My son has a developmental delay & an IEP. He continued receiving his supports once per week via video (tele health) for speech therapy & social worker [*sic*]. There were days he cried from frustration since not even I would understand some assignments.

This family's response about remote schooling was among a handful of frustrating and emotionally difficult experiences, particularly for children with needs for special services (i.e., IEP, 504, bilingual education). As one White family also noted about remote schooling, "It was awful because he has autism and was out of routine. He wouldn't do the work without meltdown or go on [*Product Name Removed*] calls." Without typical support from educators on an in-person basis, a number of students with special needs were in tears, struggling with staying connected to their learning, or in need of typically required additional support.

Choosing "Yes" To In-Person School For Full-Time Work and Child Learning Needs

For many families that selected "yes" to in-person school, key needs included childcare for full-time, in-person work and support to learn for their children. Unlike families that might have been able to continue work remotely, these families often explained their choice as a need to go *back* to work. Only a few explicitly explained this choice as a need for *physical* return, but staying in the house with their children was not possible any longer. Related to returning to full-time work on an in-person basis were childcare needs. Often mixed with these needs was learning support for children that was sometimes related to the limits of remote learning.

Full-Time, In-Person Work

The family choice of in-person school was based often on full-time work status but particularly on an in-person basis. Among the group of parents that selected in-person school, this group most often made their decisions along a theme of family needs, particularly the issue of full-time work on an in-person basis. Within these family needs were a mix of codes about childcare needed for families to physically go back to full-time work. For example, one Latino parent wrote, "I need to go back to work. Financially I have to go back. I can't afford to stay home with them." Indeed, many parents questioned the idea that it was a "choice" to return to in-person school. One Latino wrote, "I have no choice is [*sic*] either send my child to school or loose [*sic*] my employment. My job will not accommodate me working for from home to have my child take online learning." Like this Latino parent, many families that chose in-person learning did not always feel they had a choice because their need to work and have childcare steered their decision.

Some concerns about returning to in-person schooling also meant difficulty supporting remote learning. As one White male wrote, "I wouldn't know how to support online learning and still earn a paycheck. I used up most of my time off in the spring." Similarly, one Latino parent wrote, "My children were failing at online learning [*sic*] high honors at school with guidance. I work so much and don't feel like I can be of much assistance." Families suggested combined reasons, such as the need for educational support, struggles with remote school, and family members needing to work, related to decisions to return.

Support to Learn

In addition to the need for childcare to perform their own full-time work, many families selected in-person schooling because of the theme of a need for learning support for their children. Key issues within this theme were family ideas of in-person school being "better," offering more teacher support

for learning, and their child's relationship with other children and adults in school. As one Latino family put it clearly, they chose in-person school for their children "*para aprender mas.*"⁴ And as one White parent wrote, "Virtual learning did not work for my family because my son needs extra help with reading and sees a social worker. He has anxiety and trouble focusing." Particularly noticeable in White families' responses were also noted concerns about their children's development and the idea of "falling behind." Like the group of families concerned about childcare and work, some parents who elevated their child's learning also infused concerns about work and childcare. This suggests that parent responses elevated primary concerns while potentially also reflecting related concerns. For some, families wanted their child to learn but also felt "forced to choose in person."

Many Latino families offered similar concerns about learning in school but in relational, not entirely service-needs terms. As one Latino parent wrote, "I believe kids should be able to have in person classes [*sic*] and the right person to teach them [*sic*] too many distractions at home." Another Latino parent wrote, "He really wanted to go back to school to be taught by his teachers and not a random virtual teacher." And another Latino parent wrote:

My son is too little and can't read yet and therefore he needs someone to be with him at all times to guide him through, and he is reluctant to do so at home. Whereas when he is in school he loves school and learning and engages easily and willingly with his teacher.

White and Latino respondents shared concern about learning but understood it in subtly different ways. Rather than school meeting only a work or educational service-oriented need, Latino children thrived on the connected and relational aspects of schooling in a particular social context (Irizarry et al., 2014). These Latino families suggested that remote school made it difficult for their children to feel connected to peers and cared for by teachers in particular ways that supported learning and growth (Rolón-Dow, 2005; Antrop-González & DeJesus, 2006).

Choosing "No" to In-Person School for Child and Family Safety Concerns

Families choosing "no" to in-person schooling centered their decisions on issues of safety from COVID-19. Nearly half of all families in the survey selected "no" to in-person schooling with the theme of health safety as key to their decision. Out of the entire group of respondents that selected "no" to in-person school, a vast majority of this group cited the theme of safety during the pandemic in their decision. Many families used the exact words "safe" or "safety" within their responses. For example, a Latino parent wrote, "I do not feel my children would be safe from contracting Covid-19." Similarly, one White male family member wrote, "To keep him as safe as possible we decided to keep him home." Safety concerns were judgments about broader systemic responses to the pandemic, not just about individual educators or schools.

Like these families, several others also cited the physical conditions of school buildings and the possibility of exposure to COVID-19. Families knew their schools and where exposure to COVID-19 could occur. For example, a Latino family wrote:

...school buildings are not any safer now simply because everyone is asked to wear a mask, [*school district name removed*] buildings are old with poor ventilation, not many windows, high class sizes etc. social distancing "when possible" does not make me feel confident in sending my child to school.

These calculations were important because many newspaper articles suggested a lack of trust from families, particularly Black and Latino, to return to in-person schools during the pandemic (Harris, 2020; Shapiro, et al., 2021). However, the decisions were not made only on trust but on direct knowledge of school buildings and understanding of how their schools would operate in pandemic

⁴ Author translation: "to learn more."

conditions. In this study, families of color, particularly Black families, were disproportionately among the group selecting “no” to in-person school. These responses were clear that safety from COVID-19 drove their decisions to keep children home with some form of remote school even if that was not the preferred mode.

This theme of health safety extended beyond children at school to the scope of the whole family’s health. In addition to safety, many families specifically discussed the health concerns of their children and other siblings, grandparents, and family members living in the same household. In particular, many respondents discussed their families’ existing asthma and immune complications as key health issues in their decisions to keep children at home. As one Latino family wrote, “At home we are immunocompromised so we did it out of abundance of caution and for the health of the family.” Similarly, one Black family responded, “My child will not be returning to in person learning because I feel that it is still not safe and if they were to get sick then a [*sic*] can make me extremely sick as well as other people in the home.” As such, safety was not merely about individual safety or academic performance. Rather, safety for many families across racial groups was about mutual health for their children *and* family.

More often than every other group, Black families in this survey selected not to return to in-person school in fall 2020. In total, 14 out of 17, or 82%, Black participants selected “no” to in-person school for fall 2020. Nine of the 14 families specifically talked about safety as their primary concern. In particular, these families noted the context of limited plans from schools and districts along lines of safety. Like many Black families, one parent wrote that her child’s district “doesn’t have much of a plan to protect our children from spread of the virus.” Another Black parent wrote, “My children will engage in distance learning to start because I don’t feel the school is equipped to safely operate with the plan they’ve presented.” In response to lack of safety plans, one Black parent noted she was “not risking anything” because schools “were barely clean before COVID-19.” In her final analysis, she believed that “[her] kids [would] be missing out on a few things but it [was] for the best.”

In this survey, Black families were the most consistent in explaining their concerns about health safety, risk, and the lives of their children and family. Only one White and one Black family noted direct family death from COVID-19. Despite that small number, Black families in this survey were the most direct about their families’ lives. As one Black male parent noted, “I want my children to stay alive.” In addition, several Black parents with full-time jobs *and* children with disabilities chose the safety of their children first through remote online school over in-person school. For a few Black families, online schooling could provide safety *and* more focused learning that in-person school had limited in the past. While there was no stated connection between past school closures that had severely impacted Black and Latino families, these Black families contested in-person schooling in language as sharp as opposition to past permanent school closures in Hartford and other cities.

Finally, a few families made choices about their own as well as other families’ safety. For example, some families with particular resources, such as less immediate need for in-person school and out-of-house work, made their remote/online choice for the safety of their children and support for others. One Latino parent with full-time work wrote:

We have all the resources available for my son to stay home and attend online learning. I feel like one less child in class for those children who don’t have the resources available and have no choice but to attend in person school is beneficial for all. One less child one less potential exposure.

With the resources available for remote schooling even with full-time work, this parent and other families explicitly chose remote schooling as a way to help other people’s children by creating smaller school sizes (i.e., safety).

Convergence and Divergence

When comparing qualitative and quantitative findings, there was convergence along key areas of making these choices for types of schooling. First, there was convergence of families' explanations of full-time work pushing the need to return to in-person schooling along with quantitative data. There was a statistically significant positive correlation between full-time work status and the selection of "yes" to in-person schooling ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$). While the correlation is not causal, families explained their decisions to return to in-person schooling as often connected to their need to return to full-time work and need for support for their children to learn. Many families also explained their need to return to full-time work in person as a key issue. In addition, many of these families explained their children's needs for support to learn in the classroom. As these families noted, remote schooling often struggled to support the needs of their children and families.

Second, there was convergence between family concern of healthy safety from COVID-19 and choosing "no" to in-person schooling. In terms of quantitative data, there was a significant negative correlation between selecting in-person schooling and families' scores on the question of concern about health safety in their possible return ($r = -0.38, p < 0.01$). While the correlation is not causal, families selecting "no" to in-person schooling also explained a set of health concerns for their children and families. Many families also noted the limitations of remote schooling in supporting their child's schooling. But families selecting "no" to in-person schooling also explained that schools lacked safety precautions from COVID-19 to satisfy their concerns that remote schooling could offer them. Although the majority of families of color explained this concern of returning to in-person learning, the qualitative concern was most noted by Black families that numerically selected "no" to in-person schooling more than any other racial group in this study (no = 14, yes = 3).

There was some divergence in the qualitative and quantitative data. In terms of special services (i.e. Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 504 plan, Bilingual Education / English Language (EL) services), there was no significant correlation with the selection of in-person schooling. However, many families explained key concerns of special services related to IEPs and 504 plans in the qualitative responses explaining their decision to return or not. Second, there was a strong qualitative concern with online remote learning during the spring 2020 session connected to decisions to return to in-person schooling in fall 2020; but the concern of remote learning in spring 2020 was not strongly correlated to decisions to return in person. These factors may be worth exploring in combination with each other and controlling for variables in a more advanced statistical model (e.g., logistic regression).

Conclusion

In many cities, a response to temporary school closures during COVID-19 was the offer to families of a new form of schooling choice with partial, not full, equity. Both quantitative and qualitative responses converged to show that families choosing "yes" to in-person schooling explained their need for childcare to assist with their full-time, often in-person work. Rather than full equity in their choices, these families viewed in-person schooling as the only method that would provide their children with the education they needed. For these families, remote schooling did not offer the childcare they needed to continue full-time work or the support for learning their children needed. On the other hand, both qualitative and quantitative responses converged to show that families choosing "no" to in-person schooling explained their concern about safety from COVID-19. Rather than full equity in their choice, this remote schooling choice provided their children and families with health safety but also many limits on educational interaction with other children, educators, and other aspects of school buildings. For these families, the choice of in-person schooling did not offer the safety these families needed.

Rather than fully equitable policies related to the choice of either in-person or remote schooling, families faced a set of programmatic and space choices that addressed one but not all of their family needs during COVID-19 (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Scott & Stuart Wells, 2013; Horsford et al., 2019). As this study suggests, decisions for in-person schooling often related to levels of employment. In addition, decisions for remote schooling, or “no” to in-person learning, were based on safety considerations. Those choices helped reduce in-person school building enrollment and class size in a way that potentially benefitted families with full-time in-person work and provided their children with access to potentially safer school buildings. Families that selected remote schooling—a majority of families in Hartford and other cities—arguably made in-person school possible by reducing enrollment in school buildings. While families concerned about safety chose online classes and computers, families that selected in-person school received smaller school environments that provided in-person instruction and childcare.

Schooling choices during the pandemic that offered partial equity also raised questions in terms of racial inequality. As Ishimaru (2020) notes, equitable collaboration between schools and families “begins from the premise that non-dominant families (which includes young people themselves, their caregivers, and extended relations) represent a largely untapped source of expertise and leadership for achievement of educational equity and justice” (p.4). Yet the reapplication of past school choice language and offering different forms of schooling raises questions. As a powerful educational policy, or “schema” in Ray’s (2019) sociological terms, applying the old idea of school choice to the new problem of pandemic school closures might satisfy a variety of needs among different actors, such as state and district leaders, businesses, families, and other actors in the education sphere. However, such a reapplication of school choice to return in person or remotely may also reproduce racial inequality (Ray, 2019). In Hartford and other cities, a sizeable number of Black and Latino families selected remote learning in ways that helped provide other city residents with safer in-person schooling.

In sum, families’ explanations of their choices and their consequences should be further examined. With a sample of participants in a study of a new issue, there were also unexpected limitations that can be further explored. A small number of families with multiple children chose “yes” to in-person in the quantitative response but sent only one or two children to in-person school and kept another child home for remote schooling. While this was only a small number of families, this issue suggests the need for deeper statistical analysis. Thus, future research should account for the ways that families negotiated choice for multiple children. The next questions for study may also include how families experienced and evaluated their choice during the school year. Choices during the school year may have shifted as family conditions and context changed.

Next steps must go beyond concepts of choice with partial equity and community engagement toward equitable education now and after the pandemic. In light of this, leaders and teachers should plan now to work with families toward creating a safe, well-resourced, and rich educational experience for a potentially long transition. This transition will likely include returning to in-person schooling and some continuation of remote learning for a period of time. Any expansion of in-person schooling must include specific and concrete steps, including, but not limited to, continued physical spacing, building updates, safety equipment, vaccinations (only available to children over 12 years old as of this writing), and wide COVID-19 testing.

In addition, schools must concretely explain how their school practices will address past and present inequities in how children of color are treated by schools. Educational leaders may also be wise to review existing guides that suggest racial equity, cultural responsiveness, and humanizing approaches with families to devise new community-centered plans for school return (Kirkland, 2021). In this study, many Black and Latino families suggested that remote schooling was the safest choice during the pandemic and foreseeable future. The next steps must include safe physical spaces and education that addresses past and present issues of racial inequity.

Appendix A: Family Demographics, Child Access Needs, & School Ratings

Return to In-Person School	No (n = 89)	Yes (n = 66)	Total (n = 155)
Family Demographics			
Racial Identification			
Black	14 (15.7%)	3 (4.5%)	17 (11.0%)
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	33 (37.1%)	23 (34.8%)	56 (36.1%)
Two or More Races	8 (9.0%)	4 (6.1%)	12 (7.7%)
White	34 (38.2%)	36 (54.5%)	70 (45.2%)
Gender Identification*			
Female	79 (88.8%)	58 (89.2%)	137 (89.0%)
In another way...	3 (3.4%)	1 (1.5%)	4 (2.6%)
Male	7 (7.9%)	6 (9.2%)	13 (8.4%)
Residence			
Hartford Resident	59 (66.3%)	38 (57.6%)	97 (62.6%)
Not Hartford Resident	30 (33.7%)	28 (42.4%)	58 (37.4%)
Work Status			
Full Time	54 (60.7%)	54 (81.8%)	108 (69.7%)
No Full Time work	35 (39.3%)	12 (18.2%)	47 (30.3%)
Child Access Needs			
Type of School			
Lottery-based enrollment	69 (77.5%)	60 (90.9%)	129 (83.2%)
No Lottery-based enrollment	20 (22.5%)	6 (9.1%)	26 (16.8%)
Children in Single/Multiple Districts			
Single District	76 (85.4%)	62 (93.9%)	138 (89%)
Multiple Districts	13 (14.6%)	4 (6.1%)	17 (11.0%)
Elementary Level Child			
Elementary	61 (68.5%)	50 (75.8%)	111 (71.6%)
No Elementary	28 (31.5%)	16 (24.2%)	44 (28.4%)
Service Needs			
Service Need (IEP, 504, Bilingual)	36 (40.4%)	33 (50.0%)	69 (44.5%)
No Service Need	53 (59.6%)	33 (50.0%)	86 (55.5%)
Transportation Need (bus)*			
Bus	32 (36.0%)	24 (36.9%)	56 (36.4%)
No bus	57 (64.0%)	41 (63.1%)	98 (63.6%)
School Ratings (0-10 scale)			
Last Year School Rating ('19-20)	7.0	8.1	7.5
Remote Learning Rating Spring '21	5.9	5.5	5.7
Concern Health with Return to In-Person Fall '21	9.3	7.6	8.6

*One family did not respond to this question

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